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CELEBRATING THE PLEASURE SEEKERS: A CENTENARIAN FACES THE YOUTUBE GENERATION

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INTRODUCTION

The first movie trailer was produced in 1913 for the musical ‘The Pleasure Seekers’ and was shown at the end of the main films. One hundred years later, the movie trailer itself has become part of the art form and is a highly anticipated part of the experience. Trailers have their own reviews, specially-composed music and are nominated for awards (Doperalski, 2012). However, in recent years, trailer makers have had to adapt to one of the Internet’s most disruptive influences: the ‘social’ revolution, where the Top 10 Trailers viewed on YouTube in 2012 exceeded 200m and with much viewer-generated discussion (e.g. Skyfall 21m views 16k comments).

With an estimated 1.3bn tickets sold in the US alone in 2013, the movie business is, by any estimates a large one. On average, the top grossing movies from 1995 to 2013 took \$380m, but only one in ten films breaks even (Gong et al, 2011). Significant effort is expended by the studios to take advantage of the small promotional window and excite viewers; the outcome is to encourage a paid trip to the theatre and to generate positive word-of-mouth (WOM) about the film. Often, studios will produce a range of different trailers for each film: appealing to different segments (Johnson 2011); designed for alternative channels (Tourmakine 2005); or rated for adult audiences (Buckerman 2005). Despite the increased options for enticing theatre visits, attendance is in decline; down 18% in the past decade, perhaps another dimension of the digital world in which we live. Given the importance of trailers to the outcome of the commercial performance of the film, surprisingly there is no uniform method for assessing their effectiveness. The present research takes a step toward this goal.

In a review of recent literature, we offer a theoretical categorisation, which we tested in two ways: qualitatively (study one); and using experimental methods (study two). From this we have drawn tentative conclusions, which lead to future research directions which we plan to complete early in 2014.

BACKGROUND

Along with film characteristics and non-studio factors (e.g. film reviews), marketing is one of the main success drivers of a movie (Prag & Casavant 1994) and advertising can positively influence box office performance even if the product is poor (Basuroy et al. 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Elberse & Anand 2007). Films have a very short commercial lifespan and their financial success is often determined by the opening weekend (De Vany & Walls 1997; Stapleton & Hughes 2005; Gong et al. 2011). The industry is highly seasonal with summer bringing the most popular and most profitable movies, but this time sees increased competition and marketing costs (Radas & Shugan 1998; Epstein, 2005).

Trailers are experiential sources of information and have the biggest impact on viewing decision (Eliashberg & Shugan 1997; Devlin et al. 2011). They are the only type of visual advertising that offers a free sample of the actual product (Buckerman 2005). Trailer testing is as important as film testing, to the point where if a trailer does not achieve the studio’s objectives during the testing period, it will be withdrawn and re-edited (Epstein 2005). Goldstein

(1991) identifies a U-shape relationship between trailers and box office performance, showing that a trailer can cause more damage to the studio – when it receives negative viewer response. The greatest challenge is to make audience pay to watch a film, in an era where films are so easily downloadable (Tourmakine 2005; Griff 2012).

Trailers are also a key generator of WOM, which positively influences a film's success prior to release (Moul 2007). Despite this, most researchers have explored WOM activity post-release (De Vany & Wals 1999; Elberse & Eliashberg 2003). Exceptionally, Eliasberg et al's (2000) MOVIEMOD conceptual model focuses on pre-release marketing efforts, including how trailers can affect viewing intentions during the decision making process and generate WOM activity after the viewers have seen the film. The technological changes since then have initiated changes in viewer expectations and the context of our research is trailer viewing in the digital era. The availability of trailers online has completely changed the laws of trailer viewing, allowing the viewer to interact freely with the trailer (by stopping, forwarding or replaying it). These factors mean that the consumers' interaction with the trailer is very different in a 'social' environment than in the theatre (Fritz 2012) although it is unclear how this affects purchasing intent. Online viewing also includes the ability to comment on a trailer, which acts as a powerful source of pre-release WOM. Our research focused on two areas: (1) what elements of a trailer are most important when considering a viewing intention and; (2) are these positively related to beneficial outcomes (measured as viewing intention and contribution to WOM) and our hypotheses were simple:

- H1:** *A trailer conforming to the combined 'effective' archetype will generate a greater intention to view as a result of viewing.*
- H2:** *A trailer conforming to the combined 'effective' archetype will generate a greater likelihood of viewers contributing to word-of-mouth as a result of viewing.*

METHODS

Our research was conducted over three separate but related studies during the summer of 2013. As research into trailers on digital channels is nascent, it was necessary to take a partially exploratory approach and as such our hypotheses were formed as a result of the first two studies rather than a review of the literature alone. However, our initial framework which was developed in Study 1 was built on a range of prior work which we contextualised to the digital medium. In Study 2, we conducted initial tests on our framework using six trailers of three different films from the most popular genres. Analysis across studies one and two allowed us to review our interpretation of the literature in relation to the digital medium and we developed tentative hypotheses, which we tested experimentally in Study 3.

STUDY 1 – CLASSIFICATION

We selected a range of the most highly promoted films of the summer of 2013 and, following the procedure for categorisation outlined by Rich (1992), conducted a theoretical categorisation of trailers, focusing on evidence of a range of features, which were then compared with extant literature: (1) Timing (Tourmakine, 2005); (2) Plot outline (Campbell, 2008; Flanagan, 2012); (3) Narrative (Maier, 2009; Crooks, 2011); (4) Explanatory power (Sternthal and Craig, 1982; Takayuki et al. 2012); Title cards (Ravid, 1999).

For each category, the literature indicates which of the individual traits would be more effective and there was no evidence of a confounding effect between the factors. Consequently, we theorized that if these factors are observed *in combination* we should be able to predict the efficacy of the trailer. But are the factors comprehensive and do they apply in the context of Internet viewing? Using the ideal type categorisations in table one, we analysed the content of

two trailers for each of three of the summer of 2013's most heavily marketed films: *The Heat* (comedy), *The Wolverine* (Sequel) and *The Lone Ranger* (Adventure). In most cases the categorisation was based on observable evidence and therefore was objectively assessed, e.g.: we could time the speed of cuts and assess the likelihood of background music to be recognisable based on previous release or by the artist. Certain traits were not evidenced from a single observation and in these cases we needed to categorise it by a combination (e.g. our judgements about 'extra information' were based on the presence and position of cards or voiceover).

Our evaluation of the factors related to the sequel was more subjective, but we accepted the minor risk this presented to the study on the basis that we were not attempting to draw any conclusions from this phase; simply to select archetypes for empirical study. For each film, we identified one trailer that conformed with our 'effective' archetype and one that did not: our qualitative study was designed around these trailers.

STUDY 2 – QUALITATIVE

We used these trailers in three focus groups (n=6 per group). Participants were aged 19-27 (which is widely recognised as the group that represents most frequent cinema visits). The trailers were shown from YouTube directly on laptop screens, with the intention of replicating the experience of the trailer on social media. We engaged the focus group members in discussion about the trailers. While we used the categorisation table to prompt our questions, participants were not aware of it.

We concluded that our categorisation of the effectiveness of the trailer archetypes was broadly congruent based on their verbal indication of their likelihood to: (1) pay to see the film; and (2) to contribute to WOM either in person or by sharing a link to the trailer. Based on the evidence of the focus groups, we added a new trait related to the prominence of the co-star for further testing in study three.

STUDY 3 – EXPERIMENT

When our analysis of the focus group data was complete the three films in study two had been released with varying box-office success. We therefore chose a heavily-marketed late-Summer blockbuster for our experiment: *Elysium*, in the 'sci-fi' genre. We found a number of trailers, which we categorised using the same methodology as in study one, focusing on observable traits rather than subjective rating where possible. Through this process we identified: (1) one trailer that contained evidence of *all* the traits identified by authors that suggested it would be effective (i.e. the combined effective archetype). (2) One where certain positive traits from the combined effective archetype were omitted. *Elysium* is an original film so our categorisation for sequels was not relevant and was disregarded. Based on evidence from our study 1, we added a new trait: the prominence of the supporting actor and this was included in our categorisation of the trailers. In addition to the traits noted from literature, the prominence of the movie's secondary character (played by Jodie Foster) was markedly reduced in the second trailer. This provided evidence of our novel findings from the qualitative study.

The dependent variables were the respondents' viewing intention and the level of WOM activity. An online survey tool (Qualtrics) was employed and a snowball sample strategy was employed using the researcher's online social networks to recruit respondents. Participants were randomly allocated into one of the two conditions (n=100). The respondents were 52% male and were aged between 18-30 years. 17% of the participants were native English, and 61% came from other European countries. Pre-existing 7-point scales were used and the questionnaire was pilot tested before being distributed online and agreed to pass face validity. Tests were carried out for scale validity and

Cronbach alphas were in excess of 0.800 for all constructs. For both hypotheses, independent-samples “Levene” *t*-tests were run in order to test the relationship between the independent categorical variable (Trailer 1/Trailer 2) and the dependent continuous variables (viewing intention and WOM activity).

In relation to purchase intent, variance was found between the conditions (4.00 vs 5.24 on a scale of 7; *sig* 0.017 single tail; effect size 0.76 Cohen’s *d*) indicating a significantly increased likelihood that our trailer categorised as effective would prompt a decision to view the movie. In the case of contribution to WOM, variance was also found between the conditions (3.07 vs 4.22 on a scale of 7; 0.000 single tail; effect size 0.74 Cohen’s *d*) indicating a significantly increased likelihood of Elysium’s ‘effective’ trailer encouraging the viewer to spread positive WOM.

DISCUSSION

In all three of our studies we uncovered compelling evidence that certain trailers are more effective than others when considering two key outcomes: intention to purchase and contribution to WOM. This is the first time that all the traits have been tested in combination, with previous research focusing on individual characteristics. In addition, we established the presence of an additional factor that is important in the context our dependent variables: the prominence of the supporting actor. Interestingly, our evidence to date only relates to movies where the secondary actor was female and while this may be reflective of reported gender bias in Hollywood movies (NYFA reported in HuffingtonPost.com), it warrants further investigation.

We noted in both studies two and three that the trailer exerted a notable effect on the likelihood to recommend the film, this was qualitatively and quantitatively lower than the respondents’ intention to view, meaning that their intention to contribute to WOM is lower. Possibly, respondents were wary of risking their reputation as a reviewer if the film turned out to be poor, supporting the notion that the primary WOM effect is post-release and highlighting the importance of the satisfaction of early-viewers and shows their influential effect. However, if tactics could be employed that were successful in stimulated pre-release WOM, this would offer significant incremental benefit to studios’ promotional efforts.

These studies are part of a work-in-progress. Our aim at this stage was to establish a broad-spectrum view of which traits combine to make an effective trailer and our initial experiment shows a strong-effect size between groups of respondents who saw Elysium’s ‘effective’ trailer and those who saw another. This fully supported our expectations following our review of the literature and our qualitative study. This framework enables the construction of an effective trailer, offering theoretical insights to those interested in the deconstruction or analysis films and trailers, as well as practical contributions to production studios and independent trailer houses.

However, we acknowledge the limitations of this study and do not claim to be able to separately predict the effects of individual traits as a result or to establish their relative importance. In reality, the production of movie trailers is subject to too many variables for us to establish generalizable rules for the creation of an effective trailer, but through future research that builds on these studies we hope to identify whether certain factors are *de rigueur*. Our intention indicators among participants was relatively high (mean 4.62 on the ‘effective’ trailer) and it would be interesting to see if the position is the same in less desirable films. Finally, we used standard trailers and were not in control of variables; future research can overcome this.

References available on request.